

President's Address  
to  
Obstetrical  
Society

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Barnes  
1867.



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# PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

(ROBERT BARNES, M.D.),

DELIVERED AT THE

## Annual General Meeting

OF THE

## OBSTETRICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON,

JANUARY 2ND, 1867.

*[From Volume IX of the 'Transactions of the Obstetrical Society of London.']*

LONDON:

PRINTED BY

J. E. ADLARD, BARTHOLOMEW CLOSE.

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## ANNUAL ADDRESS.

My last duty as President is one of most unalloyed satisfaction. I have to record the events of another year rich in scientific profit, pleasing by the memory of agreeable meetings and friendly associations, prosperous even beyond our own high standard of prosperity in all that makes a learned society thriving, solid, and useful. Against the 31 Fellows lost to us by death or resignation, we have to count 65 new Fellows elected during the year. We now number 536 Fellows and 25 Honorary Fellows—a greater number than we have ever mustered hitherto; but not, I am well persuaded, the greatest number we are destined to see. Besides this accession to our Ordinary Fellows, we have had the satisfaction of enrolling five new Honorary Fellows; namely, Professor Hugenbergcr of St. Petersburg, and Professor Lazarewitch of Charkoff, in Russia; Professor Rizzoli of Bologna, and Professor Lazzati of Milan, in Italy; and Professor Simon Thomas of Leyden, in Holland—men illustrious in their respective countries, and in the republic of science, which embraces all countries.

The losses we have sustained by death, although not light, are, happily, less considerable than those it was my duty to record last year. I regret that the scanty details which have reached me do not permit me to render due justice to the memory of those fellow labourers who have gone from amongst us.

Robert Hardcy, of Hull, died at the age of sixty-three, on the 12th of May last. He had enjoyed a large practice at Hull, and had earned the universal esteem and confidence of his professional brethren. These distinctions—the highest and the most honorable that a medical practitioner

can attain to—he owed to excellent personal qualities and rare professional accomplishments and skill. He was educated at the Borough hospitals; he was a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and a Licentiate of the Apothecaries' Society. He had held the offices of Superintendent of Quarantine of the river Humber, and Certifying Factory Surgeon at Hull; he had also been Lecturer on Obstetrics at the Hull and East Riding School of Medicine. He was the author of an essay on "Special Position and the Obstetric Binder in Impeded Parturition," published in the second volume of our 'Transactions.' This essay was remarkable for sagacity in observation, originality in deduction, and for useful applications to practice. I look upon it as one of the most valuable and most interesting of the many contributions to science which our Society has been the direct means of evoking from the experience of men who, but for the opportunity thus afforded, might never have been induced to give them to the world. He had also contributed to our 'Transactions' a valuable "Case of Abnormal Gestation," in vol. ii, and a "Case of Acephalo-Cyclopean Monstrosity," in vol. iv. He had filled the offices of Member of the Council, Vice-President, and Honorary Local Secretary of our Society.

William John French, M.R.C.S. and L.S.A., died at the age of forty-five at Southsea, on the 3rd of June. He had been engaged in general practice in Wilton for twenty years. Through his zeal in the practice of obstetrics we had become acquainted. He studied at the late Queen Adelaide's Lying-in Hospital whilst I was house-surgeon there. He was indefatigable in his work. He attended an astonishing number of cases during the time he lived in the hospital, and was most industrious in preserving notes of his observations. I regret that, like too many other men, whilst treasuring up the records of his experience for his own instruction, his too modest estimate of their value deterred him from publishing them for the instruction of others.

John Mackintay, of Isleworth, was one of the original Fellows of our Society. He had served as surgeon in the



Hon. E. I. Co.'s service. He was cut off at the age of sixty-two on the 8th of July.

John Pudsey Welshman Sydenham, Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries, practised at Islip in Oxfordshire. He died on the 26th of June.

Reginald Bayley Walters, of William Street, Regent's Park. He was M.R.C.S. and M.S.A. He was educated at Bartholomew's.

Edward Guest, F.R.C.S., died on the 4th of January, 1866, at the age of forty-nine. He practised in Halsey Street, Chelsea.

Andrew Sisson, M.R.C.S., died on January 4th, aged fifty-seven. He practised at Reigate.

Francis Bennett, F.R.C.S., of Gateshead, died on the 24th of September, at the age of fifty-nine. He was educated at Edinburgh and the Borough hospitals. He wrote several useful memoirs on points of practice in medicine. He was Surgeon to the Gateshead Dispensary and Lying-in Charity, and was a Justice of the Peace.

William Quarrel, M.R.C.S., died at Torquay, on the 10th of February, at the early age of twenty-five.

Edward Williams Richard, M.R.C.S. and L.A.S., of Finchingfield, Essex. He was the author of several essays in general literature.

William Middleton, F.R.C.S., of Leamington, died July 4th, aged sixty-three.

Our finances are in a sound condition, as the Auditors' Report will show. Notwithstanding the extraordinary demand upon our resources made by the Exhibition and the Catalogue, we have managed to add £50 to our funded capital. We have now a sum representing £1012 19s. 6d. in the 3 per cents.; a position I think you will agree with me in regarding as eminently satisfactory. In previous years we have indeed invested more largely in the funds; but this year we have acted boldly upon that policy which I ventured to advocate when I had the honour of addressing you last year: we have put out our spare cash at scientific interest.

And we may, I think, congratulate ourselves upon being wiser and more fortunate than the commercial societies of limited liability, during the year of panic, which seeking solely pecuniary returns, and missing that found no compensating gains. We are secure against this danger. Knowledge cast abroad can hardly fail to fall upon good ground, and wheresoever it falls it springs up, not a hundredfold simply, but it goes on through all coming years sowing itself, ever multiplying, and ever enriching the soil that receives it. Who can calculate the increase destined to flow from our Exhibition of obstetrical instruments held in March? Beyond the immediate gratification derived from the gathering of so many associates in the pursuit of obstetric knowledge, beyond the direct personal enjoyment created by extending and cementing individual friendships, there abide for all who joined in that great gathering pleasing memories, and the consciousness of added scientific strength enhancing the interest that binds us to our vocation, and making us more useful to our fellow creatures. And still beyond that there is the increase of prestige and influence gained to our Society by the greatly extended communications with our fellow workmen abroad. For the first time in the history of medicine an opportunity has been given for the display, side by side, of all the instruments and other mechanical appliances which our predecessors and contemporaries, at home and abroad, have contrived for the help of suffering woman.

Upwards of 600 visitors attended the opening of the Exhibition at the *Conversazione*, held at the College of Physicians on the 28th of March. Many others took the opportunity afforded of examining the collection during the subsequent days upon which it was open either at the College or at the rooms of the Medical Society of London. Professors Hugenberger and Lazarewitch came expressly from Russia; Professor Martin and his son, Dr. Carl Martin, came from Berlin. From all parts of the United Kingdom visitors came; and at the banquet held on the following day, to receive our foreign guests, a large number



of Fellows and distinguished visitors took part; we shall all, I think, retain a pleasant remembrance of the cordiality that prevailed throughout our great Obstetric Congress. From every side we received hearty sympathy and aid, and our thanks were especially deserved by the revered President and the Fellows of the College of Physicians, for the generous spirit in which they placed their magnificent building at our service.

It is not my intention to enter upon any minute description of our Exhibition of obstetrical instruments. The best and only adequate description that can be drawn is presented in the Illustrated Catalogue, of which each Fellow will receive a copy, and which will, I believe, long hold a conspicuous place in obstetric and medical literature, for the originality of its character and the richness of its matter. It preserves, or will call to mind, most of the characteristic features of the Exhibition. Amongst the most interesting of these are the copious illustrations of the history of obstetric medicine, showing how the present forms of instruments have been developed out of the first conceptions. In this manner the progress of obstetric practice in different ages is exhibited step by step in the instruments, which are the actual symbols, often more striking and intelligible than written works, of the minds of the authors. Another remarkable feature is, the bringing under one glance the separate instruments and the sets of instruments used at the present time by different practitioners in different countries. Nothing could be more curious or more interesting than this picture of what I may call comparative midwifery. Parturition cannot differ so widely in different races or different countries. Why, then, should the means of aiding parturition be so varied? The answer must be, partly at least, in the traditional influence of different teachers and schools, which, starting from different points of departure and seeing things from different aspects, have guided their disciples along particular roads. It is a singular illustration of the unity of truth, and of her power to guide aright those who seek her in an honest spirit, that these roads should all lead to the

same goal, the alleviation of human suffering. This comparison of the means adopted by different persons to attain the same end, will tend—has already tended—powerfully to dispel the prejudices with which each school clings to its favorite doctrines, and to make each seek in the rest materials for self-improvement. I am firmly persuaded that this Exhibition has tended more powerfully than any amount of literature could do to diffuse a more just mutual appreciation of our knowledge and practice; and that it is still pregnant with beneficial results, which will become manifest in the improvement of obstetric practice at home and abroad. A book speaks only one language, an instrument speaks an universal language, and needs no translation. An example has been given, which will, probably, be followed by our more purely surgical brethren.

Now, a few observations upon the work before us. It is true, material enough, and more than enough, to fill up the ordinary meetings of the Society has never been wanting. But it has always been felt that a great Society like ours, possessing members in every part of the kingdom and its most distant colonies, is expected to do something more than merely to hold monthly meetings for the reading and discussion of memoirs contributed by individual members. We ought to turn to account the great organisation we possess; to enlist the active services of all our associates in such scientific works as require the combined efforts of many observers dispersed over varied fields of observation.

We have already achieved something in this way. The magnificent success of our exhibition was greatly due to the zealous co-operation of our whole body. I have now to submit to you another project. Dr. Farr, of the Registrar-General's Department, whose labours in illustration of vital statistics are so well known, and whose practical sagacity is always directed to the end of making the facts accumulated in his office subservient to the lessening of human suffering, has invited us to aid in collecting information as to the various modes of treating the new-born infant in various countries.

Dr. Farr's object in this investigation—and it is one directly contemplated in the foundation of our Society—is to diminish the actual heavy mortality amongst infants. A well-directed effort to accomplish this end must, he observes, be based upon extensive and accurate information as to the main causes of the excessive mortality, and as to the various modes of managing infants at the earliest periods of life. In this latter respect, the most singular diversities exist, not alone in different countries, but even in different parts of our own country. Possibly some of these diversities may be accounted for, and may be reasonably justified, by diversities of race, of climate, and of other special conditions. Still there must be, independent of all these diversities, some universal laws of physiology which apply to all races and to all places, and which are often disregarded out of heedless submission to inherited customs. To show how far these departures from natural laws are the causes of infant mortality, and to establish sounder methods of managing new-born infants, is the task proposed. It is an honorable and useful task, in the prosecution of which our resources and organisation may be most effectually engaged. I think it will be felt by us all that it is no insignificant acknowledgment of the position we have attained amongst the institutions of the country, that our aid should be sought in a work of such great national and human interest. The Council have resolved to undertake this investigation; and communications will no doubt be sent to every Fellow, inviting the co-operation of all.

One of those points which are peculiarly fitted for investigation by the machinery of a large Society, is the influence of epidemics upon parturition. Since our foundation, two opportunities have occurred of making observations in illustration of this question upon a large scale. In 1863, we had an epidemic of smallpox; and, during the year that has just run its course, we have had an epidemic of cholera. Now there are several interesting questions arising out of the reciprocal influence of pregnancy and epidemic diseases, which are as yet far from being solved. What is the in-





fluence of smallpox, cholera, scarlatina, typhoid, typhus, and relapsing fevers, upon the course of pregnancy, as in causing abortion, premature labour, the death of the embryo? What is the influence of these diseases upon the course of labour, upon women in the puerperal state? What is the susceptibility of pregnant or puerperal women to be attacked? What is the influence upon new-born children? In what manner—that is, by what agency upon the blood or the nervous system—do these zymotic diseases act? What is the resultant mortality? These and other cognate questions might receive important elucidation, if we could collect from all our Fellows the histories of any cases of pregnancy and labour complicated with zymotic disease which have come under their observation.

There is one question touching the scope of the functions of a learned society, upon which I desire to offer a few words. It has often been suggested that a scientific society might usefully guide professional and public opinion by expressing a collective judgment upon controverted points in theory or practice. The temptation to put forth decisions of this kind is sometimes great. But it is certain that such decisions can rarely be pronounced without danger of lending authority to error. It is, in the first place, extremely difficult to isolate a scientific question in medicine from its natural or artificial complications, to reduce it to the terms of a definite proposition that can be submitted to the suffrages of a body of men. In the next place, we have to remember that medicine is a progressive science. The doctrine of to-day is not the doctrine of yesterday; and to-morrow it is still less likely to be dominant. Yet we are all of us, more or less, under the thralldom of present doctrines. To commit ourselves to an absolute decision, must lead to one or two evils—possibly to more. We either subject ourselves to the contumely of seeing our judgment reversed when appeal is made to a more advanced tribunal; or, to the extent of our authority, we discourage and retard the re-examination of the question; and by so doing, of course, we discourage the spirit of original research.

Recognising, therefore, the imperative law that medical knowledge can never be perfect, howsoever closely it may, on any given point, approach perfection, it is wiser to abandon the attempt than to pronounce absolute and definitive judgments. The last word upon any medical topic will not be uttered in our time. But wise and just as this reasoning may be with regard to questions of medical doctrine and even of medical fact—for abundant experience shows that it is scarcely less difficult to determine a medical fact than a medical doctrine—it does not apply with equal force to the exercise of the function of deciding upon questions of ethics bearing upon the relations of medical practitioners to each other and to the public. Medical ethics form but a branch, or rather an application, of those immutable laws of justice which have held wholesome sway over mankind in all ages. It is to maintain respect for these laws that all associations of men designed for good purposes have been made. A medical society would but ill fulfil its duty if it shrank from upholding in their integrity those rules of honorable conduct, by the scrupulous observance of which we can alone deserve and acquire the confidence of the world. I would therefore not venture to dictate limits to any man's researches, if conducted in an honest spirit; but I should not hesitate to denounce any flagrant departure from the rules of professional morality.

But I feel that I must not trespass with further reflections upon that indulgence which I fear I have sometimes abused. I now resign the chair to my successor and friend, Dr. Hall Davis. In his hands our commonwealth will receive no detriment. In retiring, a deep feeling of gratitude impels me to acknowledge, that whatever success may have attended my presidency is largely due to the generous confidence and ungrudging co-operation of the Council, and especially of our admirable Secretaries, and to the kindly support or forbearance of every member of the Society.



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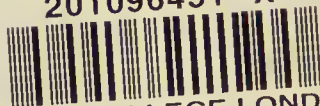
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